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A Talk by Charles D. Maginnis at the Annual Dinner, Nov. 4, 1948.

I come to Washington nowadays with a new sense of its sophistication. This has nothing to do with its familiar formidablenesses, but derives from a singular experience with a cabman whom I found awaiting me one day outside the National Gallery. He was a most improbable cabman so as to suggest by his general air and manner and address that he might be a member of the British Embassy who had fallen from his high estate and was doing penance for some diplomatic irregularity. When, during the customary chit-chat as we rode along, it was revealed that I was an architect, he confided to me that he had met Thomas Hardy who meant to be an architect but thought better of it. This led him into more exciting thought, for he suddenly turned with an air of troubled curiosity. "By the bye", said he, "where should I seek convincing evidence of the genius of Frank Lloyd Wright?"

But it is not the memory of this incident that causes my diffidence on this occasion, but a distaste for the sort of controversy which seems nowadays so inevitable to artistic discussions. Architecture in its own terms is no longer intelligible to the public, so that the architect is summoned to the platform to add to the general clamor. Is it not a depressing circumstance that human beings out of the same mould should be constitutionally so incapable of coming to agreement about the most obvious matters? It is out of this unfortunate perversity we have to tolerate so much literature about Art, so much literature about Music and so much literature about Literature. The message of the artist is not permitted to wing its own way, to find its own fortune. Critics and commentators crowd in upon its address with their contentious theories as to what it is all about. Books about Art, when they are not serving history, are mostly the vehicle for that interminable friction of opinion that has made Art an inscrutable and vexatious interest, titillating to the elect and intimidating to the humble-minded. You cannot give your admiration to the product of an artist, ancient or modern, without encountering a corresponding current of critical disparagement. It would be folly, therefore, to attach too much importance to the opinions of architects about architecture. Mine is but another voice. Tonight I am uneasily sensible of being under suspicion. If I should appear less than enthusiastic about modern novelties, you are bound to detect a bias in my gray hairs. And I cannot hope to escape your doubts of my intellectual honesty, since at the end of my career I am reasonably interested to defend myself against the invalidation of my own accomplishment.

It used to be that an architect could enter proudly into a company of the historically-minded with the assurance that, ever since the beginning of time, his art had been the cherished instrument of history, the infallible witness of civilization. It is about ready to surrender this high prerogative. Through the ages, moreover, it held the primacy of the Fine Arts. Henceforth, this pretentious estate is to be dismissed as an aristocratic pomposity. It is to be a fine art no longer. In a most dramatic volte-face the new architecture has elected to surrender these proud functions in the very passion of its functionalism. This is not a crisis that carries any additional threat to world peace, but perhaps enough excitement for the atmosphere of dinner. Obviously the world which is in the making

is going to be an uncomfortable place for the conservative. The surge of revolutionary thought that is bearing it towards us is already beating against the foundations of many cherished institutions. Ideas we had thought venerable are being exposed to daring and impudent challenge. We are not expected to question the relevance of the impending dispensation which has behind it the irresistible authority of science. We are left only to ponder on its political and social implications. The cynical philosophers who have been for long disparaging our present world now confidently acclaim the emerging one in the persuasion that progress is inevitably forward. Most of us are alarmed at the release of stupendous forces that have the capacity to lay our earth in ruins, while we are invited at the same time to put our trust in their intrinsic geniality. In the face of this grave perplexity we need faith that, as man's spirit finds its ultimate disciplines, his wisdom will eventually overtake his mechanisms.

Our artistic predicament recalls to the memory of many the industrial revolution which provoked the magnificent fury of Ruskin, who was to live long enough to see the actual invasion of his landscape by the hated steam engine. To Ruskin, who saw the implications of the event, this was the final blasphemy. Art had made compromise with machinery. Out of this came the formidable drama which is now unfolding.

It would be interesting if history revealed something of the psychology which marked those particular moments in the past when one system of architecture superseded another. One would conclude from the dry record of the books that there were no bloody noses and no hurt feelings. It is hard to believe it. I have no difficulty in imagining the impatient contempt of the Gothic fellows for the defenders of the lingering Romanesque ponderosities. Archaeology, as long ago as that, must have been a blistering epithet. But argument about such matters then, as now, was a waste of words. Time eventually settled the rationalities.

Looking backward at the variety of influences that affected the architecture of the last generations, we need go no further than Greece. When we are interested in the measure of ourselves, it is usually the Greek accomplishment that disturbs our self-complacency. The tribute that the modern world has paid to the art of Greece is the homage to a perfection which was ignored for ten centuries. When its revelation came to the modern world, it was everywhere hailed with intellectual enthusiasm and the revival of its architecture, not in America alone, was inevitable in the reminiscent temper of the time. The crowning excellence of Greek design was that it manifested its primitive system of structure in an exquisite simplicity which came of the most subtle exercise of imagination. Some one, interested in our modern validation, has said that, had the Greeks known steel, they would have left their marbles in the quarry. It is possible, but then we would not have known the Greeks, which would have been a pity.

What account, I wonder, shall we be able to give of ourselves to future generations? We are reasonably anxious as to the course of the rebellious movement. Washington is already a favorite target for the shafts of the new philosophers. No American community is so provoking or perhaps so vulnerable. The academic principle, which, in other cities, is only casually asserted, has here been carried by Government into an organic and commanding integrity, which has gradually come to be accepted by the whole country as emblematic of the national dignity. This developing interest, which has so deeply concerned the artistic organizations of America and has enlisted so many capabilities of the first order, may now be jeopardized. Yet it would be altogether unreasonable and unfortunate if the anti-classical bias, however intellectually

respectable, were permitted to intrude at this juncture so as to prevail over elementary principles of order and harmony. We have the evidence of our eyes that the competence of this protesting order to create a corresponding symbolism is yet far short of demonstration.

There can be no delusions, however, about the earnestness of the challenge. All the architectural schools of America have capitulated and their graduates, equipped only with the techniques of modernism, must presently become a formidable and possibly an irresistible influence. Nevertheless, I look for resistance to the imposition of an architecture so limited in its visual satisfactions as to promise a terrifying transformation of the national scene. Its advocates differ considerably in the translation of the thesis. The extremists of them are puritans who decline to make any sinful compromise with beauty. It is with these only that I take issue. I have no quarrel with the others. Much accomplishment in the modern temper I have admired intensely. Reticence and simplicity are not qualities over which the traditionalist disputes. Indeed in our present circumstances there never was a time when less persuasion was needed to bring these particular virtues to popularity. My entire grievance with the modern postulate is that it could be composed by the amendment of a single word. It proclaims that architecture is the expression of function. I hold that it is the felicitous expression of function, and as such must involve the principles of beauty and imagination.

As to the media that shape the modern envelope, it is curious now to recall that throughout history man when he builded went to Nature for the sticks and the stones. She is now expected to retire into her geological virginity, for the modernist has chosen henceforward to identify his philosophy with steel and concrete and the synthetics of factories. Ferro-concrete has been acclaimed as the magical instrument by which we are to express the genius of the new age. Whether it has all the adequacy of this considerable idea is not yet established and one wonders if it has been successful only in expressing the genius of ferro-concrete. It is unquestionably a medium of interesting capabilities but we have been too occupied by its acrobatic properties to detect its limitations. Not the least of these is that it makes for a universal monotony which obliterates national individuality, and nationalism is still an urgent principle. We might be concerned too about its impermanence, but the advocates of the new architecture are strangely indifferent to its survival. If it serves its time it is enough and posterity must be satisfied with other symbols of our consequence. The complete acceptance of its idiom leaves no bridge with the past and no link with the future. May it not then be too positively held that masonry is also one of the archaeologies? Need we forget that our inherited beauty was wrought in bricks and stones of which the world has still a plenty?

Those of us who are persuaded that the past is not to be easily dismissed are none the less content that it rest henceforward more lightly on our generation. We have lived perhaps longer than we need have under the full burden of it. We had become so accustomed to the veneration of antiquity that our emotions could be excited by our histrionic illusions of it. My plea for the validity of masonry is not that it may promote the nostalgic disposition but that it may serve the modern spirit in the admirable ways of, let us say, the architecture of Scandinavia. In Sweden I, too, could count myself a modernist. There, one observes an architecture of sanity, of distinguished moderation, true to its time but with no disloyalty to tradition.

With all our realism we are a most sentimental people who will not for long be content with a skeletonized architecture. The scientific system that is being proposed to

us has not yet risen above the topicalities. Simplicity might well have been its largest gift but it is presented to us, not as a gracious excellence, but as a harsh and defiant emptiness. Its content is thin, its temper too immediate, fitting only for the things that end tomorrow. Why should we shake off the tyranny of history only to take on the tyranny of the passing hour? We may glorify steel but it makes for no interesting ruins and even the poet of realism is not apt to sing long over the scrap heap. Architecture should have the gift to express our ideals no less than our realistic habit. We need a language for our dreams, for those flights of the spirit that are the signs of our eternal striving. Some one has said "What is utility but an end that can be seen by the short-sighted? All the great ends lie further". Through the long centuries man fashioned the memorials of his intellectual and spiritual life in an architecture of poignant eloquence. What he built was the measure of his aspiration, for only in building could he find the worthy and enduring symbols. We are to look no more upon the vision of that accomplishment but make submission of our minds and our hearts to the bleak hospitalities of science. The idea is too violent. Relinquish if we must the veneration of European souvenirs but let us never forget that in that wistfulness there was always acknowledgment of principles which today are as valid as they ever were to an architecture of nobility.